

# **EPA releases for public comment draft scientific study of Bristol Bay Watershed**

## ***Report looks at economic and environmental value of Bristol Bay watershed and potential impacts of mining activity in the area***

(May XX, 2012—Seattle) The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today released for public comment a draft of its scientific study of the Bristol Bay watershed, which responds to requests for EPA action by several regional, native and national groups concerned about potential threats to the watershed. The draft report makes clear that the Bay is an unparalleled natural resource and economic driver, home to the largest undisturbed wild sockeye salmon run in the world. It also assesses the potential impacts mining activity may have on this unique and sensitive ecosystem, and concludes that there is potential for large-scale mining to have adverse impacts on the productivity and sustainability of the salmon fishery in the watershed. Under the Clean Water Act, EPA has the authority and responsibility to protect the nation's water and perform scientific studies that enhance the agency's knowledge of water resources.

"Bristol Bay is home to 50 percent of the world's wild sockeye salmon, and is both an important economic engine and major contributor to a sustainable food supply in the state of Alaska and the country," said Dennis McLerran, EPA's Regional Administrator for the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. "With these factors in mind, our draft assessment makes clear that a high bar needs to be met before large-scale mining projects with the potential to disrupt this sensitive and economically vital ecosystem should go forward."

EPA's focus in the assessment is scientific and technical; the agency has made no judgments about the use of its regulatory authority under the Clean Water Act and will not consider this issue until after the assessment undergoes scientific peer review. The assessment will inform future decisions on large-scale mining in Bristol Bay, including the review of any individual permit applications that are submitted and other actions consistent with EPA's authority under the Clean Water Act.

The assessment focused on the Nushagak and Kvichak watersheds, which produce up to half of all Bristol Bay salmon. These two watersheds are open to mining development under Alaska law. EPA's report looks at potential impacts large-scale mining could have both from the footprint of the mine and from potential operational failures of the type historically associated with mining activity.

Key findings in EPA's report include:

- All five species of North American Pacific salmon are produced in Bristol Bay. The Bristol Bay watershed supports the largest sockeye salmon fishery in the world. The Kvichak River produces more sockeye salmon than any other river in the world. The Nushagak River is the fourth largest producer of Chinook salmon in North America.
- Bristol Bay's wild salmon fishery provides at least 14,000 full and part-time jobs and is valued at about \$480 million annually.
- The average annual run of sockeye salmon is about 37.5 million fish.
- Bristol Bay provides habitat for numerous animal species, including 35 fish species, more than 190 bird species and 40 animal species.

While drawing on available information about proposed mining projects such as the Pebble Mine, EPA's assessment focused on the characteristics likely associated with any large-scale mining project in the watershed and the resulting environmental impacts, including the potential loss of habitat used for salmon spawning and rearing, the creation of large volumes of mining waste and the need to store that waste in tailing ponds or other structures in perpetuity, the potential release of metals and other toxics to groundwater and surface water, and the need for extensive infrastructure to support mining in this remote area, including a lengthy transportation corridor with roads and multiple pipelines.

EPA also examined the importance of Bristol Bay salmon in sustaining the traditional subsistence lifestyle of Alaska Native Villages in the watershed. The assessment includes detailed reports on Bristol Bay indigenous culture, wildlife and economics, as well as salmon and other fish.

EPA will take public comment on the draft assessment until June 30. The agency has also scheduled public meetings in Alaska in June and will host webinars for people interested in learning more about the assessment. EPA is also submitting the draft assessment for independent scientific peer review. For information on public meetings and how to submit comments, visit our website: <http://www.epa.gov/region10/bristolbay/>. For more information about the peer review process go to:

For more information on EPA's Bristol Bay Watershed Assessment and to read the assessment, visit:  
<http://www.epa.gov/region10/bristolbay/>